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Where are the Geographers? Newly Incorporated Municipalities (NIMs) in the South

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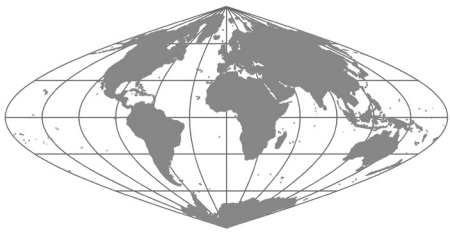

ABSTRACT

The creation of new cities can have dramatic impacts on urban landscapes regarding tax rates, land use patterns, school districts, and the provision of other municipal services. Between 1990 and 2005, 193 newly incorporated municipalities (NIMs) were created in the South. The study of these new cities falls under the purview of the larger field of boundary change. Boundary change can take the form of annexation, consolidation/merger, secession, the formation of special districts, and incorporation. This paper examines the current literature on the different forms of boundary change and provides potential explanations for why municipal incorporation is an area of research that has been overlooked by geographers. Through a case study of municipal incorporation in the South, this paper will then explore the ways in which geographers can contribute to our understanding of this topic.

Key Words: municipal incorporation, boundary change, metropolitan fragmentation.

INTRODUCTION

The appropriate role of local government in American society has been the subject of much discussion among urban scholars for decades (Schneider 1986, Downs 1994, Orfield 1997, Rusk 2003). Much of this national dialogue has analyzed the fragmentation of metropolitan regions into smaller-scale, locally administered governmental bodies. The end result has been a 'Jeffersonian-style' grass-roots revolution as small communities across America have incorporated for a variety of reasons: to control their own destinies, to protect property values, to reinforce racial divisions, and to provide basic urban services. Newly incorporated municipalities (NIMs) result in the creation of new boundaries that help shape the political and social fabric of the country. The South U.S. Census Region in particular is at the center of this trend.

Specifically, the South witnessed the formation of 193 (55%) out of the 353 new incorporations in the country between 1990 and 2005.

Despite these profound geographic changes, municipal incorporation as a topic of study is largely absent from the geography literature. A recent article on political geography research in the South stated that "very few studies have appeared on the efficacy of governmental structures in the South" (Webster, et al. 2007, 7). This is all the more surprising, given the explicitly geographical dimensions of issues like metropolitan fragmentation, racial segregation, and land use patterns. For example, the formation of a city creates a new political entity that substantially reconfigures the spatial dynamics of the metropolitan region. These new cities may also impact the provision of services within a region by adding another layer of bureaucracy to an already balkanized political landscape. In the end, the duplication of existing services may result in an inefficient and excessively expensive delivery of services to the public. A geographic understanding of such processes is essential in order to understand the impacts of NIMs on the metropolitan landscape.

Metropolitan reform advocates support the consolidation of governments (i.e. annexations and consolidations/mergers) because, they argue, such actions help cities to grow and become more efficient providers of public services (Orfield 1997). Conversely, others argue that the addition of more service providers will lead to more competition and drive down the cost of service for the public -- the so-called public choice school of thought (Tiebout 1956). Public choice proponents argue that "a more politically fragmented metropolis promotes efficiency because residents, functioning as municipal consumers, choose from among different bundles of services and tax rates that the various municipalities offer" (Purcell 2001, 616).

The limited existing literature on municipal incorporation alludes to a distinct racial component to city formation, which offers geographers an opportunity to examine the role segregation may play in the establishment of NIMs. Specifically, the incorporation of homogeneous municipalities seems to be a growing trend not only for white-dominated areas, but also for black- and Hispanic-dominated areas. The incorporation of cities like Green Level, North Carolina (73.4% black) and Sedalia, North Carolina (83.8% black) are prime examples of NIMs with largely homogeneous black populations which recently decided to establish cities. A sort of racial or ethnic clustering may be occurring along municipal lines as opposed to traditional neighborhood lines. A more rigorous geographic analysis would greatly aid in the understanding of this phenomenon and significantly contribute to the urban and political geography literature.

Finally, urban geographers should be keenly interested in the role that NIMs have on shaping land use patterns. Some case studies of municipal incorporation have argued that the desire to better control land use and zoning decisions is often a major impetus for establishing new municipalities. The balkanization of urban areas through the formation of new cities that control land use and zoning patterns can lead to increasingly complex transportation, environmental, and land use planning problems. As a result, regional planning efforts can be greatly hindered by such fragmentation.

Geographers, then, have the potential to offer unique spatial insights into these profound changes facing urban America as new cities are incorporated. This paper first explores the literature on boundary change. Secondly, it attempts to understand why municipal incorporation has remained a neglected area of research by geographers. Finally, by examining the geographic patterns of incorporation in one region, the South, this paper attempts to uncover some of the geographical trends in NIM formation.

BOUNDARY CHANGE SCHOLARSHIP

The scholarly work focused on boundary change includes research on annexations, se-

cessions, consolidations/mergers, formation of special districts, and incorporations. Each of these types of boundary change can have dramatic impacts on the urban geography of cities regarding tax rates, land use patterns, school districts and the provision of other municipal services. The following section reviews the recent literature in each of these sub-fields.

Annexation

Annexation is the most common form of boundary change, with thousands of municipal annexations occurring each year (Feiock & Carr 2001). Annexation is a process by which a city adds territory to its existing city limits. Individual states set their own procedures, creating a complex mosaic of policies governing the process (Palmer & Lindsey 2001). For example, several states in the Northeast only allow annexations to occur through a state legislative approval process. Others require the residents of the area being annexed to approve it, while a few even allow municipalities to annex unilaterally (Palmer & Lindsey 2001). Annexation is an important tool for municipalities to capture tax revenue (Rusk 2003) as well as a tool for extending public services into unincorporated areas.

Recently, Smirnova and Ingalls examined the effects of annexation laws on central city growth in a group of selected southern cities. The results revealed that more restrictive annexation requirements led to increased levels of political fragmentation and, as a result, less tax revenue for central cities. Looser annexation standards in some parts of the Southeast allowed for increased central city growth and the ability to collect additional tax dollars (Smirnova & Ingalls 2007).

Historically, annexation research takes two primary forms: classification studies and the analysis of annexation activity. Some research has attempted to classify state laws concerning annexation (Sengstock 1960, Hill 1978, USACIR 1993, Palmer & Lindsey 2001). The second primary area of research examines the effects of annexation requirements on overall annexation activity (Dye 1964, Wheeler 1965, McManus & Thomas 1979, Galloway & Landis 1986, Liner 1993, Carr & Feiock 2001). Both broad research areas focus on determining the relationship between the type of annexation available to municipalities and the frequency of annexation.

Secession

The process of secession involves the separation of a part of the city from the rest of the municipality, offering residents the opportunity to "exit" a municipality without having to relocate their place of residence (Hogen-Esch 2001). Some secession efforts involve an area becoming unincorporated, while others lead to the incorporation of new cities. Secession research has primarily focused on the Los Angeles region, driven in part by the recent failed efforts by San Fernando Valley residents to secede from Los Angeles (Keil 2000, Purcell 2001, Boudreau & Keil 2001, Hogen-Esch 2001, Hasselhoff 2002). The primary focus of these studies has been on the organization of the groups promoting secession, as well as the potential political ramifications if these efforts had been successful.

Consolidation/Merger

Boundary change can also occur through the amalgamation of existing governments, either at the same level (merger) or at different levels (consolidation). The merging of two cities is more common than the consolidation of a city and a county (Feiock & Carr 2001). Despite the infrequent nature of consolidations and mergers, considerable research has been devoted to the process.

This research has focused on a variety of different issues. Feiock and Carr have examined the impact that city and county consolidations had on economic development efforts (Feiock & Carr 1997, Carr & Feiock 1999). Other studies have looked at individual consolidation efforts around the

country (Durning 1995, Lyons and Scheb 1998). Additionally, Marando (1979) completed one of the first national examinations of consolidation, finding that "recent court cases and increasing city-county disparities may indicate that consolidation will be less likely to be achieved in the near future" (420). Finally, Lyons and Lowery surveyed residents of two metropolitan areas (a consolidated government structure and a fragmented metropolitan region) to determine levels of satisfaction with governmental services (1989). They found that in general, citizen satisfaction with government services is comparable across consolidated and fragmented metropolitan regions.

Special Districts

Boundary change may also take the form of the creation of a special district government. Special district governments are created to provide particular services such as water and sewer service, fire or police protection, airports, or hospitals. In some cases these are created to fill an unmet need, while in others, they are designed to compete with existing municipalities for service provision (Feiock & Carr 2001). The definition of a special district government varies substantially across the country. Such creations are a rapidly increasing phenomenon (Burns 1994).

Scholarship on special district governments has focused on the spatial distribution of special district governments and the types of state policies that impact their creation and development (Bollens 1986, McCabe 2000). Burns found that many special districts are formed in response to citizen demands for public services (1994). The growth in private or alternative special district governments (e.g. Business Improvement Districts and Community Benefit Districts) has also recently been examined (Baer & Marando 2001, Baer & Feiock 2005). Finally, some studies have linked stricter state municipal incorporation laws with a rise in the formation of special district governments (MacManus 1981, Bollens 1986, Nelson 1990). These studies have found that the formation of special district governments can be viewed as an alternative and more expedient form of representation for local populations. This is especially true when stricter state legislation becomes a major obstacle in the formation of new municipalities since the formation of a special district is usually considerably easier.

Incorporation

Incorporation is the legal process, established by state statutes, through which a new city is created. Incorporation can fundamentally impact the urban geography of regions. The creation of a new city can result in the redistribution of wealth in a given locale due to the potential changes in the amount of taxes paid by residents, and it can shape the level of public services provided to residents (e.g. water, sewer, fire and police services).

Scholarly research on municipal incorporations has primarily focused on either the frequency of incorporation (Rigos & Spindler 1991, Burns 1994) or attempted to explain why specific communities attempt to incorporate (Martin and Wagner 1978, Miller 1981, Hoch 1985, Rigos & Spindler 1991, Lazega & Fletcher 1997, Musso 2001). These studies have been carried out at either the national or state level. However, in 1991, Rigos and Spindler pointed out that "incorporation has yet to be studied in any systematic fashion", and little has changed since then (1991, 76).

The dearth of research on incorporation is a problem because the growth in the number of newly incorporated municipalities (NIMs) has numerous implications for communities. Proponents of NIMs argue that they foster a stronger sense of community amongst local residents, allow for more choice and competition in the provision of services, and provide a 'pure' form of democracy by giving the public direct input into the creation of their municipality (Tiebout 1956). Some argue that competition among existing and new municipalities may also result in a more efficient provision of governmental services

(Ostrom 1994). Critics of NIMs, however, assert that the growth in new government entities instead results in metropolitan fragmentation and inefficient delivery of public services (Jonas 1991, Cox & Jonas 1993, Foster 1993, Orfield 1997, Rusk 2003), economic and racial segregation (Hill 1974, Weiher 1991, Teaford 1993), and the duplication of services by multiple governments operating within an area (Marando 1979, Lowery & Lyons 1989).

WHERE ARE THE GEOGRAPHERS?

Municipal incorporation initiatives have not been a major research interest for geographers. What little geographic research exists has only dealt tangentially with the subject. An example of this work is Cox and Jonas's case study of Columbus, Ohio and its evolving annexation policy (1993). While this study did not focus on municipal incorporation, it did allude to the relationships that exist between annexation and incorporation. Cox and Jonas determined that Columbus's annexation efforts played a pivotal role in determining the political geography of the county. Cox and Jonas further explained that a key group that supported Columbus's annexation agenda was the local Chamber of Commerce, who "lobbied for changes in state laws which made annexation easier and incorporations more difficult for townships lacking a sufficient tax resource base" (Cox & Jonas 1993, 18). Additionally, the Chamber of Commerce "was instrumental in opposing incorporation moves among the townships contiguous to Columbus" (18). Cox and Jonas remind us that incorporation and annexation initiatives are interwoven in the broader discussions of 'growth machine' and local economic development theory and can substantially influence boundary change and the broader political landscape.

Purcell examined the San Fernando Valley secession movement in Los Angeles. Purcell's work analyzed the interest groups on both sides of the debate to determine their motives (2001). Pro-secession supporters included a unique coalition of Valley business interests and Valley homeowner groups known as Valley VOTE. Opposing their efforts to secede from Los Angeles were region-wide growth groups including the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, the Central City Association of Los Angeles, and the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. Through his case study, Purcell shows that the secessionists were trying to change the urban landscape so that they could more effectively influence local growth issues to their advantage. While these studies tangentially discuss municipal incorporation as a form of boundary change, neither Cox and Jonas (1993) nor Purcell (2001) directly studied municipal incorporations, focusing instead on annexation policies and secession.

What accounts for the limited participation by geographers in the research on incorporation? One impediment is the traditional division of labor between disciplines. Historically, political scientists and scholars of public administration have studied the politics of cities, and until recently, incorporation has been seen as a primarily political process. Meanwhile, much of the research on boundary change has been published by public administration scholars in journals like *State and Local Government Review*, *Urban Affairs Review*, and the *Journal of Politics*, which are not traditional outlets for research by geographers.

Secondly, the creation of a municipality is a complex event that has the potential to make any broad geographically based research challenging especially when theory on municipal incorporation is limited. Every state has different standards for incorporation that differ in terms of minimum population requirements, minimum distances from existing cities, population density standards and the minimum provision of services required to incorporate. In addition, each municipality is created for a unique combination of reasons, thus making it difficult to analyze municipalities across the country as a coherent group.

There is, however, a role for geographers in NIM research. In fact, many aspects of NIM formation are inherently geographical, from tax rate and land use patterns to the provision of public services. Furthermore, the division of space into political sub-units at the local scale has long been part of the political geographer's sphere of influence. Geographers also have a role to play in the philosophical debates between the metropolitan reform and the public choice perspectives on the delivery of public services.

NIMS IN THE SOUTH

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a geographical analysis of NIMs to determine the essential spatial attributes of newly incorporated municipalities that were established between 1990 and 2005. Specifically, this research will examine the spatial variability of NIMs by state within the South U.S. Census Region. Secondly, the population characteristics of Southern NIMs will be discussed in order to provide a broader context for understanding this geographic phenomenon. Finally, it will be argued that a complex and uneven distribution of NIMs exists in the South characterized by a clustering of NIMs in specific counties and states. We hypothesize that this clustering effect has emerged partly in response to the aggressive annexation tactics of nearby larger cities.

We relied on the Boundary and Annexation Survey (BAS), conducted annually by the US Census Bureau since 1972 to develop the database of NIMs. The BAS provides data on all boundary changes and incorporations that have occurred in the United States. Although the BAS is a self-reported survey that may not include all the new recently incorporated municipalities in the United

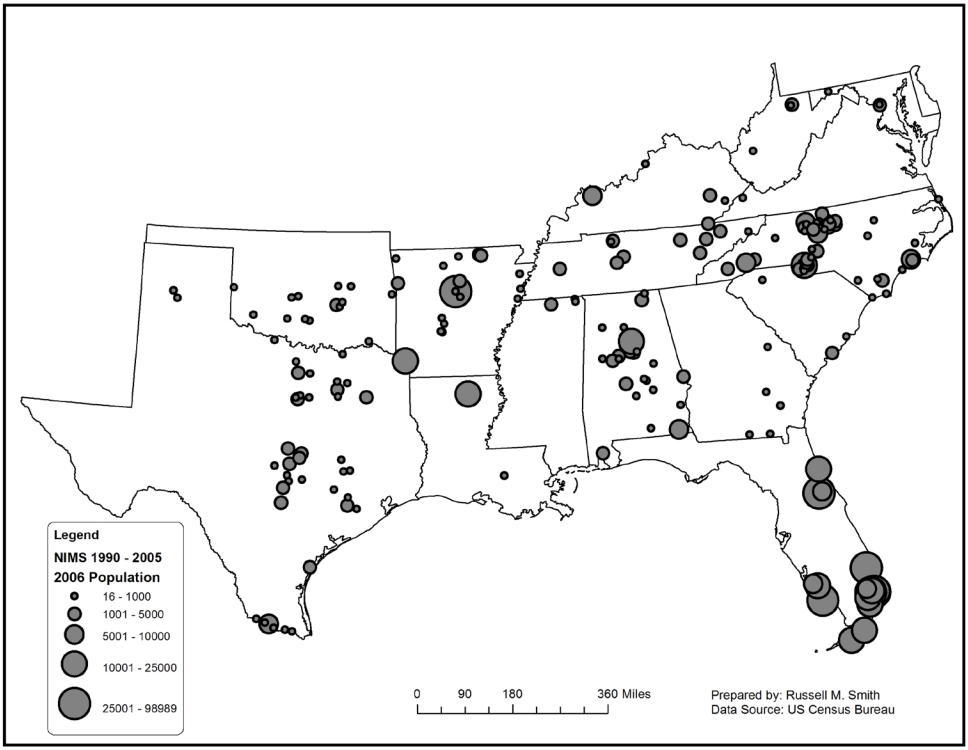

Figure 1. Spatial Distribution of NIMs established between 1990 – 2005 in the South Census Region.

States, response rates typically exceed 95 percent (Miller 1988). Response rates are high because the Census Bureau and other federal agencies utilize the BAS data in allocating federal money.

One hundred and ninety-three NIMs were created in the South Census region from 1990 to 2005, out of a US total of 353 (Fig. 1). The South accounted for 55% of all NIMs during this time even though the region comprised just 36.4% of the US population[1]. North Carolina and Texas alone accounted for just under one-quarter of all NIMs created within the United States, and, along with Alabama, Florida, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, were among the top ten states nationally for incorporation activity. What's more, all but one of the sixteen states in the South region witnessed some level of incorporation activity.

A potential explanation for this uneven geographic phenomenon may be the annexation standards of some of these states. A national review of annexation standards by Palmer and Lindsey (2001) identified twenty-two states that allow municipal annexation without the consent of the affected property owners. This type of unilateral annexation is viewed as the most aggressive form of annexation and is available in North Carolina, Texas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee which may explain the plethora of incorporations within these states. However, Alabama, Arkansas, and Florida do not allow unilateral annexation, which suggests that more research is needed if we are to fully understand the complex geographic patterns of municipal incorporation.

The population size of NIMs also varied greatly across the South. The mean population of the 193 NIMs was 4,738, although the median population was only 870, suggesting that the data is skewed and that many Southern NIMs tended to be small communities (Table 1). One of the smallest NIMs was the Town of Natural Bridge, Alabama, which incorporated in 1998 and had an estimated population of 28 in 2006. According to the *Tuscaloosa News*, Natural Bridge is "a community where everybody really knows everybody's name and where time only makes the bonds of community pride grow stronger" (Beckwith 2002).

Table 1. NIM Population Characteristics, 2006. Note that 2006 U.S. Census population estimates were utilized, since some NIMs were incorporated in 2005 and did not have a 2005 census estimate. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

State	Mean Population Size	Median Population Size
Alabama	2,010	787
Arkansas	840	355
Florida	31,579	20,173
Georgia	413	375
Kentucky	467	358
Louisiana	9,317	9,317
Maryland	683	683
Mississippi	930	297
North Carolina	2,335	1,525
South Carolina	604	509
Oklahoma	240	118
Tennessee	2,536	2,612
Texas	1,365	628
Virginia	410	410
West Virginia	1,298	753
SOUTH	**4,738**	**870**

While the majority of NIMs created between 1990 and 2005 are relatively small in population size, the South did witness the incorporation of twenty new cities that had populations greater than 10,000. The largest of these was Miami Gardens, Florida with a population of 98,989. In fact, a vast majority of these larger NIMs, sixteen of twenty, were

located in Florida. This is, in part, explained by Florida's rigorous incorporation standards, which require the largest minimum population thresholds in the South (5,000 residents). However, all of these Florida NIMs had populations in excess of 10,000 (twice the minimum standard), suggesting alternative factors beyond merely legislative standards are at play.

Several potential explanations exist for the prevalence of well populated NIMs in Florida. First, most of these large Florida NIMs originated as extraordinarily large planned unit developments from inception. For example, the original 1969 plan for Palm Coast, Florida, had 48,000 homes on 42,000 acres (Palm Coast History 2007). The municipalities of Deltona, Weston and Wellington all share similar large-scale development origins. Secondly, many of Florida's NIMs have large populations as a result of substantive in-migration that has greatly affected the State of Florida. Florida's NIMs have benefited from the large number of retirees that have sought out the warmer climes of Florida. Likewise, these same NIMs have also grown in population due to the influx of younger residents in search of employment opportunities. Finally, the well-populated NIMs found in Florida may be the result of stalled or prolonged efforts at incorporation. For example, Deltona, Florida, experienced several failed incorporation attempts in 1987 and 1990 before the City finally incorporated in 1995 (Deltona 2007). This delay may have allowed Deltona to grow in population prior to formally incorporating.

A spatial analysis of NIMs in the South reveals distinct clustering patterns. More than half (100) of the Southern NIMs are located in a county where at least one other NIM exists (Table 2). Of those counties with multiple NIMs, the leading counties included Miami-Dade County (Miami, Florida) with eight NIMs and Union County, North Carolina (just outside of Charlotte) with seven NIMs. Guilford County, North Carolina also experienced a comparable clustering effect with five incorporations between 1990 and 2005. The

Table 2. Counties with Multiple NIMs, 2005. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

State	County	Number of NIMs
Alabama	Tuscaloosa	3
	Shelby	3
	Elmore	2
	Jackson	2
Arkansas	Hot Springs	3
	Crittenden	2
	Faulkner	2
Florida	Miami-Dade	8
	Broward	3
	Lee	2
	Monroe	2
	Volusia	2
Maryland	Montgomery	2
Mississippi	Alcorn	2
North Carolina	Union	7
	Guilford	5
	Alamance	3
	Forsyth	3
	Stanly	3
	Brunswick	2
	Carteret	2
	Columbus	2
	Henderson	2
Oklahoma	Hughes	3
	Garvin	2
	Grady	2
South Carolina	Charleston	2
Tennessee	Williamson	2
Texas	Hidalgo	4
	Hood	3
	Travis	3
	Austin	2
	Brazos	2
	Hays	2
	Kaufman	2
	Williamson	2
West Virginia	Marion	2

clustering of NIMs in specific counties can be partially explained by a "herd mentality" where a local political culture is established within a region that facilitates the spread of incorporation as a response to aggressive annexation tactics of neighboring cities. For example, Union County, North Carolina, witnessed the incorporation of four new towns within thirteen months. Residents of these NIMs stated their desire to avoid being annexed as a factor in favor of incorporation (Goodman and Bernhard 1999). These incorporations came on the heels of annexation efforts undertaken by the City of Monroe, North Carolina, which originally planned to annex 1,900 acres (Goodman 1999). A copycat effect seems to take place within a region after the first unincorporated community successfully makes the transition to NIM status. This seems to encourage other unincorporated territories to consider incorporation strategies. A good example of this is the recent proliferation of NIMs within the Greensboro/Winston-Salem/High-Point Combined Statistical Area (CSA). The Greensboro CSA experienced a sort of incorporation frenzy that lasted throughout the 1990s, generating fifteen NIMs during the study period (Fig. 2). According to the *Greensboro News & Record,* "incorporation fever has swept through the Piedmont recently as small, rural communities have decided to become towns rather than get swallowed by a nearby city" (Barron 1996, B1). At the center of this incorporation fever was the City of Greensboro, North Carolina, which had developed detailed plans to annex 45 square miles of property and capture an additional 22,000 residents during the early 1990s (Barstow 1993). Greensboro's planned unilateral annexation activity clearly spurred the incorporation of several of the region's newest towns.

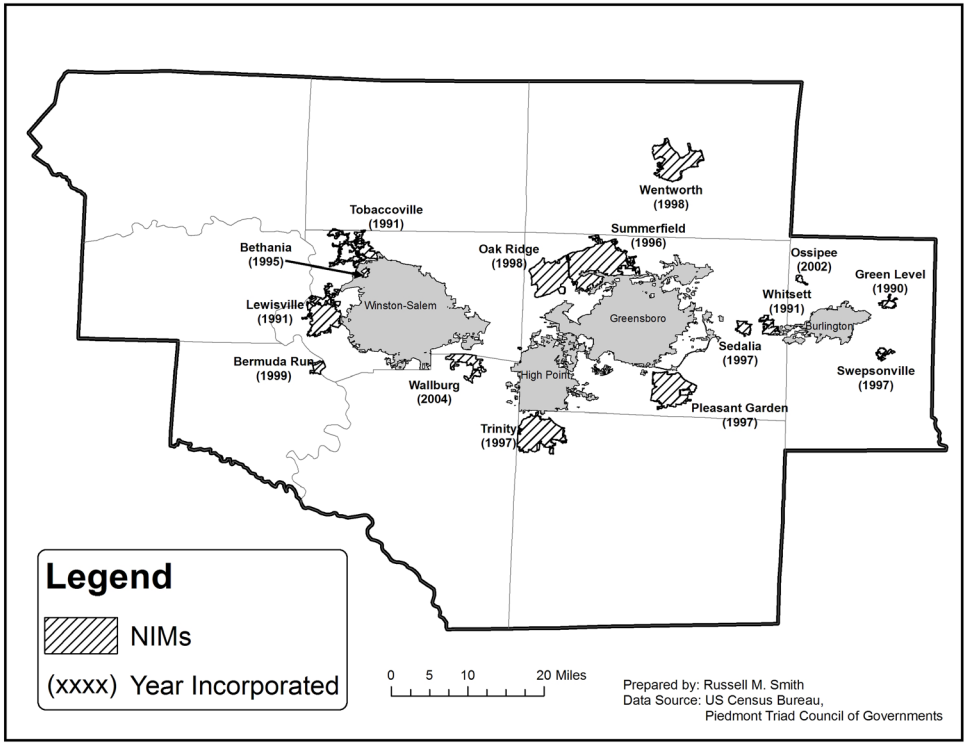

Figure 2. Spatial Distribution of NIMs established between 1990 – 2005 in the Greensboro/Winston-Salem/High Point Combined Statistical Area.

A geographical analysis of NIMs located in the South Census Region has revealed an uneven and complex spatial distribution to incorporation activity between 1990 and 2005. Several states within the South Census Region (e.g. North Carolina and Texas) generated a disproportionate share of incorporation activity, while other states experienced a small number of incorporations (e.g. Georgia and South Carolina) during this time period. A potential explanation for this variation may be the role that state annexation standards play in determining the level of incorporation activity. However, annexation standards only offer a partial explanation for the incorporation activity witnessed between 1990 and 2005 in the South. For example, more than half of all Southern NIMs are located in counties that had already witnessed the incorporation of a NIM earlier in the study period. Clearly, more research is needed to better understand the complex geographic clustering effect that characterizes many incorporation efforts.

Some of the literature has suggested that many NIMs are formed as defensive incorporations to thwart the expansionist strategies of a nearby larger city (Rigos & Spindler 1991, Burns 1994). Others argue that many NIMs are homogeneous enclaves of largely white, upper-income residents that wish to slam the door shut on their more diverse, big-city neighbors (Blakely & Snyder 1997, Teaford 1997, Musso 2001). Although the key casual agents that trigger NIMs remain unclear, it remains a research area that is well suited to geographical analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The formation of new governmental entities like NIMs has drastic consequences for the urban landscape of the United States. New cities result in new boundaries that influence tax rates, land use patterns, school districts and the provision of other services such as police, fire, and garbage collection. This paper has revealed that the South Census Region generated a disproportionate number of NIMs between 1990 and 2005. Additionally, this research has uncovered a complex and uneven pattern of NIM activity in the South. The clustering of NIMs to certain counties and states can be partially explained by a "herd mentality" in which the successful incorporation of one unincorporated area spurs additional incorporations. Finally, this paper has exposed the lack of research in general on NIMs by geographers.

The dearth of geographic research in this area affords numerous opportunities for future research initiatives. More detailed case studies of those areas with abnormally high concentrations of NIMs, for example, would shed light on the processes that lead to the "herd mentality" discussed earlier. In addition, more work needs to be done at a national level to uncover key socio-economic and political variables that lead to certain patterns of incorporation. Municipal incorporation is a complex process with serious geographic ramifications. The increasingly balkanized political geography of many counties creates a wealth of issues ripe for geographic analysis.

NOTES

1. All population figures used in this paper are 2006 estimates by the US Census Bureau.

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